

ARTICLE

WHAT WE MIGHT HOPE FOR FROM THE PLENARY COUNCIL

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When my disabled son was about 22 years old he had a big list of medical problems and a correspondingly big list of medical specialists whom we consulted once every two or three months. On one such occasion he and I sat side by side in a space not unlike an old fashioned milk bar booth. We sat on a bench with a wall behind us. I sat against another wall while Nathan had a passage way beside him. Across the table from us the doctor had a bench to himself. In front of me I had a manilla folder containing some notes I wanted to mention to the doctor.

As soon as we had exchanged “good mornings” Nathan picked up my manilla folder and dropped it on the floor, well out of my reach. I said: “this is not what you promised”. “Sorry Dad”, he said. He then eyeballed the learned professor – for such the doctor was – and said: “you’re hopeless”. I felt it was my turn to say something but before I found my first word Nathan continued: “you don’t listen to me”. I didn’t think then and I still don’t think that the doctor was hopeless but “you don’t listen to me” was right on the money and I was not going to say anything that might weaken it. We departed and our GP found us a more congenial specialist.

If ever I’m sitting across the table from our Australian bishops I should start the conversation off with: “you’re hopeless”. I would be applying this to the bishops as a team, not to individual bishops. A modern bishop has almost two jobs to do and for some the two may be irreconcilable. The bishop has been selected, educated, mentored, to be the undisputed monarch of his little kingdom. At the same time he is given the job to lead his subjects away from this pattern of community to something more like the secular aspects of modern life – a job that can only be done as part of a national team of bishops; it is this second job at which our bishops are hopeless. In my fantasy conversation with our bishops I will not say: “You don’t listen to me”. I will say that you don’t listen to the 90% of Australian born Catholics who wordlessly but with penetrating eloquence tell you every weekend that you are failing; they do this by not coming to Mass.

Two things of value, relevant here, might be learned from the Second Vatican Council. Firstly, the bishops refused to accept the agenda prepared for them. Not only that, but they insisted that the new agenda be prepared by completely new people so they got to discuss the real issues facing the church and the world and not the empty piosities offered to them. Secondly, the first item on their (new) agenda was the liturgy. The bishops voted for real change and for uncomfortable changes to their own job descriptions. But when they got home they stopped listening to Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar, Cardinal Suenens and the rest and resumed listening to their personally hand picked advisers, Vicar General, Right Reverend Monsignori, Very Reverend Monsignori and all agreed: “we don’t need any of that brave stuff around here”. The uncomfortable changes were largely passed on to the priests, many of whom were unable to live with them. This was not only in Australia but just about everywhere in the world.

Our bishops are not equipped to lead the church this century. They are wrongly chosen, wrongly educated, wrongly mentored. There are moves afoot to give lay Catholics a part in selecting bishops; the problem with that could be that some Rubber Stamps might be found from among loyal members of congregations who will endorse what is suggested to them. It may take about ten years to devise some mechanism for having the opinions of lay Catholics given proper weight. In the short

term we should take interim steps. Every new bishop should be a priest who is active in parish work in the diocese. On a particular day all such priests should assemble early in the day and vote – a bit like papal elections – and vote repeatedly until someone has a two thirds majority. He is then bishop for ten years and may be elected again next time if that's what the priests think. At the five year mark a delegation of lay Catholics should meet to assess and report on the bishop's work, strictly in terms of Jesus' instructions in Luke's gospel chap. 22, verses 25-27.

The best thing the participants might be able to do is to scuttle the Plenary Council. Our church needs an honest no-holds-barred look at itself and Plenary Council plans so far suggest that this will not be it. Perhaps the Plenary Council should expend its energy on working out how such an assembly could be brought into being and how it would work. A look at the Australian Federation Conventions of the 1890's might be helpful; we are hoping to make a new City of God as they were hoping to make a new nation. We might also learn from the people who drew up the Uluru statement "from the heart". You could say that the status of lay Catholics is very similar to the status of indigenous Australians in society and they, indigenous Australians, have found a promising road towards improvement.

Liturgy

We need to face the fact that the liturgy isn't working because almost nobody comes.

Let's start with the responsorial psalm. The word responsorial has two meanings, the second one of which is hardly ever used even in reasonably sized dictionaries. The main meaning denotes the style of singing – one voice or a few alternating with a large group of voices. I suggest that this can't be made to work in a parish setting. The second meaning of responsorial denotes a response; in this sense it can be said that J S Bach's church cantatas are responsorial. They are meditations on the scripture reading(s) the congregation has just heard, responses to the scriptures aimed at having the readings more deeply attended to. It is extremely rare to have a responsorial psalm sung in a catholic church; they are recited or mumbled and it would be rare indeed for any member of the congregation to be touched by the psalm. Christmas gives a good illustration; the psalm begins: "Sing a new song to the Lord". We do not sing this new song but we dust off all the old Christmas songs we can find.

In J S Bach's world you went to church for an hour's prayers, an hour's sermon and an hour's music. If JSB was in charge of the music you got an hour's sermon and two hours' prayers, an hour of which was in the form of music. We should organise our liturgy similarly – ten or twelve minutes homily and twenty five or thirty minutes prayers, half in the form of music. We have accustomed ourselves to deplore musicians gratefully accepting and developing the gifts God gave them, criticising them for "only" expressing themselves; we need to get over this.

Since the second Vatican Council we have dug our way into a terrible hole with readers. We have made no attempt to recruit or train readers to give of their full potential. We accept readings which we cannot understand or draw sustenance from. The readers are giving of themselves as they understand they were asked to do. They are reading to God and all honour to them for that but God does not want that and the congregation needs them to read to the congregation. We have a huge re-education task and there are some priests who will not have their heart in it.

Like most large catholic families we have some non-catholic inlaws. In Mathew's gospel chap.21 verse 28 onwards there's a parable about two brothers who were asked to work in the family vineyard. One said "yes" but didn't go, the other said "no" but did go. Our non-catholics inlaws may

have said “no” but they lived good catholic lives regardless – except for church-going. When they die, the church invites us to mourn like those who have no hope. We need better than that.

Racism

“All men at God’s round table sit and all men must be fed;

But this loaf in my hands – this loaf is my son’s bread”. Dame Mary Gilmore.

“Corruptio optimi pessimum” the ancient Romans tell us, or “the corruption of the best thing is the worst thing”. Dame Mary deftly suggests to us that some of our racism is the toxic obverse of our most loving and generous instincts.

Racism hides itself behind other means of discrimination, ostensibly more defensible. In A Christmas Carol in 1843, Charles Dickens had Ebenezer Scrooge use the overpopulation of the world as an excuse for not donating to charity. (This was before Scrooge had met the ghosts who taught him such salutary lessons.) In 1843 the population of the world was about 1.2 billion which is close to the population of Africa today. Today we can use overpopulation as something relevant to dealing with global warming but we use it for atmospheric – the whole vibes of the thing – not as if it were an available remedy. Nobody’s going to work out how many people we need to kill off in order to fix this problem and if we did we would conclude that killing white people would be a more logical way to put this theory into practice because white people cause much more global warming than others do.

Racism hides behind fear of and suspicions about refugees. There is no easy honourable solution to the problem of millions of refugees who have nowhere safe to live and gravitate towards places such as Australia but most of us would agree that the imprisonment of asylum seekers on Nauru and in New Guinea is wrong and the stated justifications are absolute humbug. We could blow this humbugger out of the water if we wanted to. The first session of the Plenary Council could appoint a delegation of 12 or 15 to inspect the places where the refugees and asylum seekers are kept imprisoned and to report back to the second session, while being free to discuss in public before the second session what they learned. The delegation should include at least two grandfathers and two grandmothers and if possible, I would suggest, Ita Buttrose.

According to Professor Google the last thing Shakespeare wrote was part of a play about St. Thomas More. Shakespeare wrote a speech for More urging Londoners to accept asylum seekers who were arriving in large numbers. One of the arguments Shakespeare put into More’s mouth was as follows. If, under pressure from you, the government treats asylum seekers badly, then if and when it suits the government to treat you badly they will do so. It’s as if Shakespeare knew about Robodebt, about the prosecution of Witness K, about the abandonment of David Hicks, Mamdouh Habib, Julian Assange. Of course he never knew about these things but he knew with laser-like clarity the temptations which beset powerful men.

Suppose instead of “I can’t breathe”, George Floyd had said “why can’t you treat me like a white man?” and suppose that the policeman had replied: “I don’t treat my dogs the way I treat my children”. Suppose further that someone’s mobile phone had picked this up and spread it around the world. In Matthew’s gospel chap. 15, verse 26 this is very much the situation Jesus put himself into in a conversation with a Canaanite woman. (In Mark’s gospel the woman’s ethnicity sounds more complex, perhaps more courteous). The book of Genesis tells us that the Canaanites are

descended from the son of Noah who treated his father with great disrespect. We're all very good at blaming people for choosing the wrong ancestors.

At the beginning of the second World War the population of the world was about 2.3 billion, about half the population of Asia today. At that time we lived on our separate continents; photos from distant countries were black and white, grainy and generally weeks old before we saw them, unlike today when we can converse face to face with friends and relatives all anywhere in the world. Our forebears had prejudices about foreign looking people, some jokes and some serious prejudices which did little immediate harm. "Don't touch that; it might have been in a Chinaman's mouth or anywhere", we were told as children. Now we zip around the world, study and work in one another's home countries and see other countries' news in full colour almost as soon as it happens. But unless we consciously cleanse ourselves of inherited prejudices we can seriously harm other people by the assumptions we bring to our contacts with them.

It's fashionable to stress the harm that social media does but if no-one had recorded what was said and done, and sent the record around the world, George Floyd would go down in history as one more black American who died of natural causes in the very act of making life difficult for the police. At the murderer's trial his superior officer testified that he had been taught not to treat people as he treated George Floyd and no doubt in formal terms this was true. It is equally certain that the informal parts of his training such as the advice of more experienced officers and the talk at after work drinking sessions greatly weakened the official line. We may live to see appeals against the length of the murderer's prison sentence because of what he was taught outside the lecture halls.

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